VIDEOPHOBIA, ENVY AND THE DOMESTIC TRIANGLE

by

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"What is television doing to our children?" This question is heard at countless meetings of parents and educators throughout the United States. It is less a question than an accusation. Posing the question assumes that TV is a malignant influencing machine, that the child is the victim of an assault upon the eye and the mind, that television viewing is typically passive, gullible and undefensed. "Expert" speakers are invited to citizens' groups to address the belief that, while watching television, innocent children ARE SOMEHOW DAMAGED (psychologically, physiologically and morally) by the medium. Although empirical studies on the effects of children's TV viewing have yielded only tentative and contradictory conclusions, communication scholars locked within the assumptions of behavioral psychology are far more likely to receive funding and achieve publication of their research if they offer to prove a "strong" relationship between television viewing and evil effects than if they seek no such relationship. Propping themselves upon this expert opinion, parents have organized political pressure groups to "do something about television"; e.g., Action for Children's Television. Here, my purpose is neither to accuse nor vindicate television, but to examine the fear which inspires these cries of alarm, these defensive measures.

Videophobia is not a fear that television will harm oneself -- the adult parent -- but the fear that the medium will seize or destroy one's most prized and vulnerable possession -- the child, formed in one's own image.

Driven by the fear of "losing" the child, parents institute a struggle for control of both television and the child. This war, in which television is both the antagonist and the prize, replaces the loving relationship between father, mother, and child which the parents believe to be "natural" -- a blissful triangle that has become perverted by the invasion of television into the home.

I wish to examine an instance of "public service" advertising, in which television presents itself as the enemy of the nuclear family. Specifically, television proposes itself as the rival of the father vis-a-vis the child. Ads of the public service type are broadcast without charge by local TV stations throughout the United States in order to fulfill their quasi-legal obligation to inform, "uplift" and educate the public. Sponsored by non-profit organizations, these ads pretend to speak from a position outside the economic and ideological system of American commercial television.

Several children are asked by an off-camera voice, "If you had to give up TV or give up talking with your father, which would you choose? TV or your father?" Each child states in turn, quite charmingly, yet firmly, that they would give up their father. Then, printed across the screen is the warning, "Use Television, Don't Abuse It."

The words "use, don't abuse" are usually spoken to warn of the danger of drug addiction; they connote problems that are not only private, domestic issues, but social problems as well. Through the words of this disembodied voice and the anonymous graphics, a concerned public authority, representing all "good"

parents, reaches into the home -- to warn parents of the alienation of their children, and to identify a familiar enemy -- the very television set which broadcasts this message -- as the cause of the alienation.

What has happened here? According to the advertisement, television has collapsed the happy home; previously taken for granted, ignored as merely instrumental, TV is revealed to possess an independent, dangerous reality. To use a term favored by both Heidegger and Freud, the home has been rendered unheimlich (uncanny, literally "unhomelike") by the action of television. In the home (Heim), and the feeling of comfort and tranquility corresponding to this familiar site, everything is "mine", subject to my control, ready to be utilized or ignored as I please. The anxiety (Angst) experienced by those who move fearfully on unheimlich sites is ultimately, Freud argues (1919, "Das Unheimliche") a kind of terror inspired by the recognition that one is forever expelled from the original home -- the womb or, more generally, the breast, the cradle, the mother's arms -- in which all needs were immediately given, in which there was no gap (gulf, abyss) between desire and satisfaction. It is the perception that one is indeed an Other, decisively separated from all that one loves, alienated from the One -- the original symbiotic unity -- that was once oneself. Here, television is the force which has ruptured the home-state and the myth of full communion between parent and child. The drama differs from the classical oedipal experience in that the loss -- the fall from grace -- is suffered by the parent, not the child. The uncanny children displayed in the

ad are still "at home", still content, unaware of the father's agony.

Although the mother is absent from the scene, she is not directly threatened by the spectacle. Her traditional role in the home -- watching, entertaining and "feeding" the child -- has been assumed by the television set. It is well-known that many mothers use television as a babysitter. TV diverts and amuses children, keeping them quiet. It may sometimes bore the child, but it never explicitly punishes. Television serves as the ever-tolerant, never-exhausted good mother, and the public service ad assumes that TV is utilized in the American home to distract or nurture the child in lieu of parental attention. A book by Harlan Ellison, The Glass Teat (1970), suggests that television functions as the mother's breast for both children and adults, but his title is little more than a provocation, ungrounded on theory or evidence. Yet the association between viewing and feeding is clearly an intimate one, argued in psychoanalytical literature (Fenichel, Klein, Laplanche, among others) and readily observed in the most banal forms of everyday [quotidien] behavior. Like cinema-going, TV viewing is often accompanied by the eating and drinking of so-called junk foods, entertaining foods, luxury foods -- play-foods as opposed to serious meals. In these activities/passions introjection through the eye is commonly paired with the actual incorporation of physical substances, each movement echoing or reinforcing the other. In any case, the children in the advertisement state that they have learned to love that object, that device, that function which provides them with the pleasure

of viewing far more than they love the father who feeds them nothing.

If the ad achieves its purpose, the parent will try to break the child's dependence on television, and the "abuse" of this food/drug. The ad specifically invites the father to assume the classical role of the Prohibiting Law -- Lacan's Nom du Père -- in which he will separate the child from the object of desire. He will (re)turn the child from the set to face "reality", i.e., himself, the father. As in weaning or toilet-training, the child must be disciplined, not for the sake [benefit] of the parents but "for the good of the children". The process of regaining possession of the child must be wrapped in the mantle [cloak] of selflessness.

Within the idealized fiction of the nuclear family, the parents assert control over persons, animals and objects in the home. The television set is owned and, in theory, operated by the parents for the benefit of all. It is available, useful, ready-at-hand (Heidegger's Zuhandensein); television is the instrumental being -- the Greek pragmata -- which works for the family. At the third point of the triangle stands the loved and loving child, idealized as the potentially perfect being. Yet the actual child rarely fits the model; he or she is forever threatening to go out of the parents' control, to become a wild agent within the home, disrupting the fragile pax familiarus. To the parent who fights to discipline a child who has become an alien, the television which intrudes a foreign image, voice and authority into the home can easily be seen (from the parental position) as the voice/image of all those exterior social forces which threaten to destroy the parents' authority over

the nuclear family. Television must be limited, withdrawn, shut-off. Like every good melodrama, the advertisement points to an external villain as the cause of the corruption of natural law. The parent is presented with the spectacle -- the threat -- of the unloving child. But the ad does not blame the child for withholding his love. The child is innocent by definition; despite the child's refusal to return the father's love, we are prohibited by the cultural role of the good parent from regarding [viewing] the child as evil. One simply must love the child, or forsake one's duty as a parent. Who, then, is to blame for the loss of love? Certainly not the parent (of either sex). Any failure of the parents to hold and strengthen the child's affection is blamed on a third party -- a foreign agent. TV is the love-thief. Placed by the ad into a jealous or envious relation with television (constituting the domestic triangle of my title), parents are invited to project qualities which they prefer not to recognize in themselves upon an object/medium they previously believed to be harmless or beneficial. To use the words of Melanie Klein (1957) television becomes an externalized, repudiated bad self; TV is the bad father, the bad mother, absolving the parents of all crimes but [except] casual neglect. It is in this context of jealousy -- the awareness of loss, the demand for possession, the projection of spite or blame -- that I examine the ubiquitous symbolization of television as an eye.

Television is both an aural and a visual medium (more information, in the communications sense of the word is carried aurally than visually), yet one speaks of it primarily in visual terms. On both popular and academic literature it is characterized, above all, as an eye, as the book titles The Unseeing Eye, Reflections in a Blood-shot Eye, The Hungry Eye, etc., demonstrate. In the United States, local news programs are called "Eye-Witness News", and the stylized eye of CBS -- long the most powerful network in American television -- has stared at the viewer for decades from the television screen. Although television is popularly suspected of causing a kind of moral damage to the child by encouraging violent, destructive and other forms of "anti-social" behavior, the concrete physical injury most feared in homes where the child sits "too close" to the set is damage to the eyes.

The eye of television looks both outward and inward. It is the outward gaze, directed towards the public world, that the institution of American television acknowledges and champions. The technology of news-gathering is continually fetishized: the glories of mini-cameras, weather-radar systems and instantaneous satellite transmissions of weddings and assassinations from around the world are constantly promoted. Yet within the melodramas and situation comedies which compose the majority of programming, television sets are rarely viewed broadcasting into the home. Within the realm of domestic fiction, the medium refuses to acknowledge its own existence.

Television is proud to announce its intervention in the public world from which it takes sounds and images, but disavows that it transmits these sounds/images into a private, familial domain. Yet the videophobia displayed by bourgeois parents throughout the United States (echoed and reinforced by the growing number of accusations against television in both academic articles and the American popular press) evidence a ubiquitous belief that television gazes into the home, maliciously influencing or poisoning its viewers.

Is it mere coincidence that these cultures which maintain the tradition of the evil eye (mal occhio, mal de ojo) fear strikingly similar effects as those societies which symbolize television as, primarily, an eye? In both the evil eye belief and so-called "scientific" research into television effects, children are the primary victims of a malignant, acquisitive vision. On the Adriatic coast of Italy, a large eye is painted on fishing boats to place them under the protection of Santa Chiara. This saint not only possesses the ability to aid victims of the evil eye, but she is also considered the patron of (what else?) television! But to properly elaborate the relationship between videophobia and fear of the evil eye, one must consider the role of envy.

The evil eye is traditionally cast [thrown, projected] by aggressive, covetous individuals within a context of social inequality. The Latin invidia, from which the word envy is derived, signifies a malicious or resentful gaze that wishes to seize another's possessions, or spoil another's enjoyment. Francis Bacon writes, "We understand why The Bible called envy

the evil eye, for in the act of envy there is an ejaculation or irradiation of an eye." I admire the ox, the pot or beautiful child of the Other. But when I fail to sieze the Other's good fortune, I turn in spite upon him, attempting to destroy his possessions with my jealous glance.

The evil eye is not always consciously projected; it is not always intended to harm. The destructive gaze may be cast unwittingly [unknowingly], as when blue-eyed strangers in Mexico admire children with too much enthusiasm. In India and Iran, and among Slovak-Americans, the eye may be cast by a member of one's family, including one's mother. Or the glance of friends may ruin a prized possession. [[It is reported that an Indian family in Washington, D. C., owned a parrot that was trained to say the names of people who visited the home. One day friends dropped by and commented favorably on the parrot. That very [same] afternoon, the parrot dropped dead.]] Yet the evil eye is usually cast by strangers, almost always by those who do not live or "belong" in one's home. In Southern Italy, those with boodshot eyes are particularly suspect. Sometimes a devil or jealous deity is the specific source of the gaze. But among Slovaks and Mexicans, evil emanations can pervade the whole environment, surrounding victims from all directions. As Elworth states in his 19th century study The Evil Eye:

> When anyone looks at what is excellent with an envious eye, he fills the surrounding atmosphere with a pernicious quality, and transmits his own envenomed exhalations into whatever is nearest to him.

Here, the eye exhales like a mouth, spewing evil into the air.

In Italy, the evil eye is compared to a virus or plague. In Mexico, the effects of a generalized "bad air" are often distinguishable from the destruction caused by a specifically located mal de ojo. Mexicans also liken the evil eye to a destructive charge of electricity. Like a radio transmitter, the eye radiates an influence; its evil travels through a medium similar to the fantasmatic "airwaves" which carry TV signals, informing or deforming its victims. In such cases, the eye acts as a mass medium.

Those individuals who are most vulnerable to the evil eye are those who possess wealth, beauty or good fortune. The eye attacks the conspicuous -- those who pretend to be "better" than the mass. But through a process of reversal, the destructive gaze may be attributed to these same "beautiful people" who first attracted the envious gaze of their social and economic inferiors. Ones own resentment at being deprived of superior values is projected upon those who display possession of those values. It is they who are greedy, covetous, not myself. They have achieved their comparative wealth unfairly, through the acquisitive eye and its polar opposite -- the eye that destroys the possessions of others. Like sadomasochism, the action of the evil eye oscillates between two paired extremes: active/passive, aggressive/receptive. The gazer attributes hiw own malignant vision to the one who receives his envious gaze, exonerating himself of guilt for being mired in misfortune. My own inability to realize a fantasy of "the good life" that I believe to be normal or natural -- a status which I know is enjoyed by the Others -- institutes a triangular

struggle in which they act to steal or destroy those few possessions which I jealously guard as my own. Like the father in the [public service] advertisement who has lost the love of the child, one blames the deficiency -- the lack of well-being -- on the uncanny (unheimlich) eye of a stranger.

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The fear of television cannot be adequately grasped by a classical psychoanalysis which confines itself to the identification of drives (triebe), their vicissitudes and derivatives in the individual, nor yet by the analysis of an enclosed family unit. Videophobia occurs precisely when the home is invaded and collapsed by an exterior force which wins the love of the child while carrying an ideology the parents refuse to claim as their own (although they may "live" the same ideology they fear). I have tried to show that this fear of the instrument/medium/institution of television is a complex social phenomenon intimately associated with the fantasy of the good (nuclear) family, displayed daily on the TV screen. At the same time, it can be argued that videophobia is a necessary byproduct of the most fundamental economic strategy employed by commercial television. If a necessary condition for the deployment of the evil eye is envy, rooted in the perception of social inequality, videophobia can be understood as a reaction to the efforts of television to institute a relation of envy between the viewer and the screen. The economic strategy can be briefly outlined as follows:

All network programming is financed, ultimately, by the sale of advertising time, thus indirectly by the sale of the product advertised. Public demand for the advertised product is grounded in, propped upon [étayage] a wish to possess the values enjoyed by the beautiful Others displayed on the screen. These Others have achieved good fortune, according to the implications of the mise-en-scene, because they have used the product in question. A second form of advertising offers a condensed melodrama in which "everyday people" have lost beauty, love or happiness through the failure to use the product. Combinations of these two tactics are deplayed ad infinitum; the fantasy of plentitude (the heimlich) is contrasted to the spectacle of deficiency (unheimlich). In short, commercial television succeeds or fails by catylizing envy in its viewers. If the advertisement is successful, the viewer will envy the good fortune of the fictional Other and attempt to possess it by buying the product. With the second tactic, the viewer identifies with the fallen state suffered by the Unhappy Other, then rejects this status as unsuitable for the self. Through use of the appropriate product one can remedy the lack, cure the disease, becoming one of the envied rather than the one who casts [projects] envy. If the advertising strategy fails, envy turns to resentment of the Fortunate Other, instituting the triangle of jealousy. An awareness of being deprived may lead to a wish to directly destroy those who possess the admired and ~~idalized~~ idealized object, or to ruin their enjoyment by spoiling the object itself. The viewer may completely reject the value of the "good" object, thus depriving the Others of

their benefit, their fortune. If the defense against the advertising message is taken one step further, the jealous viewer rejects not only the product and those who display it, but resents the medium which promotes such unattainable values. Specifically, the hostility is focused onto the material representative of the institution of television -- the TV set itself.

When one's children give evidence of being enthralled by television, when they appear to prefer relations with fictional beings in place of their "real" parents, the stage is set for the parents to convert the usually benign drama of envy vis-a-vis television into a jealous fight for control of both TV and the child. Envy, Susan Isaacs asserts ("Property and Possessiveness", 1935), is closely related to "the motives of power, of rivalry, of guilt and of love." In any jealous struggle for possession,

> "A thing that has long been treated with indifference or contempt by the owner may suddenly assume great value in his eyes if another person begins to take an interest in it; an ordinary object in the common environment may suddenly become the center of an intense struggle for ownership, if one of the children ...shows that it now has value for him."

What the parents previously took for granted (the child's love, the TV set) achieves a supreme importance once they fear that the child is being possessed by the eye of television.

Finally, I must mention that television itself, warns viewers that its programs "may not be suitable for childre-; parental discretion is advised". Or, more explicitly, "The producers of Odyssey warn that you may find this program objectionable". Here, the graphic and aural warning functions

like the traditional prophylaxis in which a possessor of the evil eye acknowledges the fears of the gazee by means of a word or a gesture. With this message, American television recognizes the videophobia of its adult viewers. The eye of television proclaims by the warning that it does not intend to cast the destructive gaze, but those who receive the glance [look, occhio, mirada] are nevertheless advised to protect themselves. But, above all, they are warned to protect the children.

The image of Kong is first evoked during a screening session within the film. As the ship sails to its unknown destination the man who produced the voyage assembles the crew in the mess room -- the scene of eating, incorporation, appropriation. Wilson, the boss, will here explain the aim and object of the voyage to both the crew and the off-screen spectator. Although the crew is ignorant of the purpose of the meeting, the spectator already knows that this voyage -- this film -- will produce the "real" Kong. Like a carnival barker or a movie publicist, Wilson shouts the promise of the scene to come: "The biggest oil strike ever -- right here in the magic circle". At the controls of a slide projector, the entrepreneur throws a series of images onto the screen: a map of the empty Pacific, a fogbank, an infrared photo penetrating the fog to show the outlines of an island, a spectroscopic analysis of the fog barrier. An engineer in secret explains tht the cloud "must result" from vapors released by petroleum deposits. Jack, the stowaway hero, now intervenes in the show. Citing fragmentary historical records partially "supressed by the Holy Office", Jack contradicts the previous interpretation of the images. The fog barrier, he claims, has been formed by the exhalations of "the Greatest Beast", a "huge...humanoid thing" whose likeness was discovered "drawn in blood" on an empty lifeboat. A conflict of interpretations.

The spectator knows, with Jack, that the cloudbank and the fragments of legend can only point to Kong, for such is the very title of the film. But this show of Kong is a

non-appearance. His presence beyond the image must be inferred from the signs -- the symptons displayed on the screen within the screen. Like Heidegger's aletheia -- the event of truth which presumes a prior concealment -- the revelation of Kong is a veiled presence which is yet an absence. Kong has produced the cloud of vapor -- the barrier-image; he is visible by his effects. Yet Kong's first appearance on this double screen is simultaneously a screening off of his "real" image.

The tantalizing bank of motionless fog is projected twice on the mess-room screen -- the only image given such insistence in this show of symptoms, promises and threats. As interpreted by Jack, who knows the "truth", the cloud speaks the danger of a monstrous, probably murderous "creature" which mysteriously mixes the normally separate categories of man and beast into a "huge, slouching...thing. The fog screen produces anxiety (Angst) because it conceals an anticipated danger whose precise form remains unknown. Yet for Wilson, the entrepreneur who interprets each image in terms of his economic project, the cloud-bank screens the well-known Hollywood ending rather than the scene of another narrative; insofar as the fog contains "free hydrocarbon radicals" it is the very image of accessible oil. The fog is to Wilson the very opposite of a barrier. It announces that the treasure lies open, ripe for the taking. The twice-screened image of the cloud bank thus condenses two opposed uses of a screen. On the one hand the screen is a surface for showing, making visible. Once the show is in progress, the screen itself is forgotten; one's attention is on the image. In other words, the screen

is transformed from a wall to a window. It no longer stops vision, but allows the gaze to pass through it to engage the the object of fear or desire. On the other hand, the screen is a barrier which closes off that which should not be seen or otherwise experienced, as when one screens-off an unmade bed from the presentable, "liveable" part of the room. The screen as a barrier both repels the outsider from what lies beyond the screen and protects the place beyond from being seen or disturbed. At the same time, the screen signals the existence of an other place -- a scene beyond -- and warns that this scene is prohibited.

The fog which screens Kong to the oil-driller, the hero, and the spectator is imaged by Kong himself. The vapor is his breathing made visible -- the vital sign of his potency. Kong is here the metteur-en-scene -- the off-screen God -- producing his own image as a deceptive facade. The screened and screening mist betrays Kong's presence in the act of concealing it; its prohibiting curtain allows the voyagers to locate the object of their desire, invites them to rip the veil assunder, to view the object in its nakedness. In place of limiting or deflecting desire, the clothing that defends the interior scene lures the gaze beyond this moist, yielding garment. In a later scene, the breath which passively suffered penetration assumes the active role. Kong bathes the woman in a waterfall, raises her to his mouth, then gently blows to dry her. She tightly clutches his hand, closes her eyes. She quivers, moans, seems to swoon. The breath of the beast has brought her to orgasm. Barrier and phallus by turns, incorporating the men and penetrating the woman, Kong's

breath seduces. The breath is, first, a screen which both promises and bars access to the scene of desire. But the breathing scene also delivers the promise of the film. "The impossible fuck" is invisible, yet it is seen through its effects. It is a phallic projection from a mouth which has threatened to eat the woman, killing her as surely as if the invisible penis had violated, split and burst her. The mouth and its emanations are not the penis but rather its image -- the phallus. The mouth breathes the Power which is Kong -- the power of eating, fucking, destroying. But in place of a rampant piece of flesh, Kong as the phallus is imaged as an orifice, an absence -- a hole.

The phallus is screened in King Kong, yet the penis is ever off-screen. Can this process of showing through not showing be specified in a term from clinical psychoanalysis? I doubt it. This is a problem of translation. What occurs in this double movement of screening and screening-off must lean on the sense of those modes of defense termed negation and disavowal (denial), but only approximately coincides with Freud's usage. Although Kong assumes the cultural position of the female throughout his reclining, passive and "sulky" scenes of imprisonment, through most of the film, the ape enacts the "masculine" threat of (potential) rape. He rivals the hero for possession of the woman, re-presenting Jack's desire. Kong is the object of Jack's narcissistic identification with an ideal ("A person may love...according to the narcissistic type ...what he himself would like to be."[43]) who is yet a prohibiting, punishing father. But the beast simultaneously represents Jack's position as a yet uncivilized child, castrated

and shattered by the Oedipal drama, forever deprived of the woman he loves.

Disavowal is the refusal to recognize that the penis is absent, but strictly, what is absent is always the mother's penis, not the member of oneself or one's father. Yet the script of King Kong "works" for the spectator only if Kong's invisible penis is presumed to be present. Kong must represent a sexual threat to the woman or this drama makes no sense as fantasy. Thus the spectator disavows an absence, understanding, according to the fiction, that the phallus functions invisibly in the scene. On the other hand, negation is a logical and linguistic defense which speaks what is repressed in the act of saying "I do not think x", affirming the value of x simultaneously with the no-saying. Neither King Kong nor his spokesman, Jack, explicitly states "I wish to rape this woman" within the phrase "I do not wish to rape her". The possibility of the rape is never spoken except in terms of being eaten. Strictly speaking, there is no clear conceptual statement to be negated. And yet the spectator clearly realizes that Kong desires the woman physically, at the same time that the script must always say "no" to the rape event by engineering a series of last minute rescues.

Whatever the term appropriate to the process which delivers a scene through the act of prohibiting it, King Kong observes the terms of the viewing contract by promising that it will defend itself (and the viewer) from the implications of its promise. "The discourse is speaking according to the reader's interests", writes Barthes in S/Z. "It is the reader who is concerned that the truth be simultaneously named and

evaded, an ambiguity which the discourse nicely creates by as though...".[44] The viewer knows better than the image. The viewer knows that Kong possesses the phallus even though this penis will not be screened. The viewer knows that cinema screens desire in the act of screening it off. The viewer pretends to be fooled, but sees the truth in and beyond the screen.

According to Barthes,

> "So-called 'erotic' books...represent not so much the erotic scene as the expectation of it, the preparation for it, its ascent; that is what makes them 'exciting'; and when the scene occurs, naturally there is disappointment, deflation. In other words, these are books of Desire, not of Pleasure."[45]

The viewer does not want the prohibited scene to be screened, as this would ruin the thrill of commerical cinema -- a thrill founded on the displacement of the phallus and the indefinite delay of the impossible fuck.

Fantasy or dream, cinema is always a facade, already interpreted, civilized, "revised". In "The Dream as Object", Pontalis writes,

> "...it is true that all interpretation is a 'symbolic wound', but also like the wound, it may be wished for: by definition it puts the unnamable at a distance, but at the same time it wipes out the visible... One could say that it [interpretation] is a murder, for certain a substitution. But this substitution is well on the way...the dream itself is already an interpretation, a translation, and what it represents is already inscribed, captured."[46]

And finally, the function of the dream-screen, inscribed in the practice of cinema, the experience demanded by the viewer, in the words of Pontalis:

> "That which I can see...is something that I can hold off."[47]

The emperor strides down the street naked, yet believes himself clothed. The gaze of his subjects is arrested by an